



## PROPER NAMES IN *YINGTOUMAO YU YINYUEXIANG NÜHAI* AND THEIR TRANSLATION INTO ITALIAN: EAGLE-HEADED CATS OR OWLS?

### *YINGTOUMAO YU YINYUEXIANG NÜHAI* DEKİ ÖZEL İSİMLER VE İTALYANCAYA ÇEVİRİLERİ: KARTAL BAŞLI KEDİLER Mİ YOKSA BAYKUŞLAR MI?

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### Abstract

The translation of proper names in literary works presents significant challenges due to their implicit or explicit meanings. This is particularly true in Chinese, where names are written using sinograms that retain their original meaning. Consequently, translating proper names from Chinese necessitates an approach that extends beyond simple transliteration. After a brief contextualization of onomastic translation, this study examines *Il professore e la ballerina del carillon* (2024), the Italian rendition of *Yingtoumao yu Yinyuexiang Nühai* (鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩, 2020), a novel by Hong Kong Sinophone writer Dorothy Tse. Drawing on the strategies proposed by Franco Aixelá in onomastic translation, I will perform a detailed analysis of the techniques employed in translating ten proper names of various kinds. The present article focuses on three primary categories: toponyms (place names), anthroponyms (personal names), and institutional names. Through this comprehensive analysis, I aim to identify the specific translation challenges associated with Sinophone proper names. Furthermore, I propose potential solutions for future translations of Chinese literature into Italian, but which could be applicable to other languages, as well. In summary, this research underscores the critical role proper names play in shaping the narrative, thus highlighting the importance of translators' decisions in preserving the cultural specificities and intended meaning of the original text.

### Öz

Özel isimlerin edebi eserlerde çevrilmesi, bu isimlerin açık veya örtük anlamları nedeniyle önemli zorluklar ortaya koyar. Özellikle Çince'de adlar, orijinal anlamlarını koruyan sinogramlar kullanılarak yazıldığı için bu durum daha da önem kazanmaktadır. Bu nedenle, Çince özel isimlerin çevrilmesi, yalnızca basit bir transliterasyonun ötesine geçen bir yaklaşım gerektirir. Onomastik çevirinin kısa bir bağlam sunumunun ardından, bu çalışma, Hong Konglu Çince yazar Dorothy Tse'nin *Yingtoumao yu Yinyuexiang Nühai* (鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩, 2020) adlı romanının İtalyanca çevirisi olan *Il professore e la ballerina del carillon*'u (2024) incelemektedir. Franco Aixelá'nın onomastik çeviri stratejilerine dayanarak, çeşitli türlerden on özel ismin çevirisinde kullanılan tekniklerin ayrıntılı bir analizini gerçekleştireceğim. Bu makale üç ana kategoriye odaklanmaktadır: toponimler (yer adları), antroponimler (kişisel adlar) ve kurum adları. Bu kapsamlı analiz aracılığıyla, Çince özel isimlerin çevrilmesinde karşılaşılan özgül zorlukları belirlemeyi amaçlıyorum. Ayrıca, Çince edebiyatının İtalyanca başta olmak üzere diğer dillere yapılacak gelecekteki çevirileri için uygulanabilir potansiyel çözümler önermekteyim. Özetle, bu araştırma özel isimlerin anlatıyı şekillendirmedeki kritik rolünü vurgulayarak, çevirmenlerin kararlarının orijinal metnin kültürel özgünlüğünü ve amaçlanan anlamını korumadaki önemini ön plana çıkarmaktadır.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contrary to common belief, translating proper names – whether toponyms, anthroponyms, or others – is not always a straightforward task, as they often carry explicit or implicit meanings. This is particularly true for Chinese, where all proper names are written using sinograms that retain their original meanings.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the translation process should begin by considering what the reader of the source text can infer from each proper name and end with rendering them appropriately in the target language.

Through a case study of the novel *Yingtoumao yu Yinyuexiang Nühai* (鷹頭貓與音樂箱女孩, 2020; hereafter referred to as *Yingtoumao*)<sup>2</sup> by Hong Kong Sinophone writer Dorothy Tse (Tse Hiu-hung 謝曉虹, 1977-) and its Italian version, *Il professore e la ballerina del carillon* (The Professor and the Music box Ballerina) (2024), I aim to examine the translation strategies used to render the proper names that appear in the original work. Beyond the usual challenges faced by translators of Chinese, translating Dorothy Tse's novel into Italian presented additional difficulties regarding these specific elements. Firstly, both the toponyms and anthroponyms refer to a fictional world that closely resembles Hong Kong. Hence, these names are neither completely invented nor entirely real. Moreover, since the work is written by a Cantonese-speaking author, it was essential to avoid potential interference from Mandarin<sup>3</sup> when translating place names, names of characters, and those of specific institutions.

By unveiling the “behind the scenes” of the Italian version of *Yingtoumao*, this study aims not only to address the issue of how to translate proper names while rendering Chinese-language literature into Italian, but also to propose solutions that could be useful for other Chinese to Italian translators and even for those translating into other Romance languages such as Catalan, Portuguese or Spanish.

Although this article is grounded in translation studies, it also intersects with onomastics, particularly literary onomastics. Hence, I will start with a brief overview of existing research on the translation of proper names. Next, I will outline the theoretical framework. Following this, Dorothy Tse and her work will be placed within the context of the Sinophone literary system.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, the proper names in the novel and their Italian translations will be analyzed. The paper will conclude with some remarks that may be beneficial not only for

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign names are also transcribed using Chinese characters, though these often serve a phonetic purpose rather than preserving their original meanings. For example, Annie is rendered as 安妮 (Anni); while 安 means “peace” and 妮 means “girl”, in this case, they are chosen for their sound.

<sup>2</sup> To enhance readability, in this study transliteration of Chinese characters is given without tone marks when *pinyin* is used and without tone numbers when *jiyutping* is used.

<sup>3</sup> Rovira-Esteva (2015b, p.12) recommends using the expression “Standard Chinese” to refer to this Sinitic language, since “Mandarin” can have multiple meanings. However, in this study, we prefer the latter because, in Hong Kong, the primary Chinese language is Cantonese, which has its own more or less standardized form.

<sup>4</sup> In this study, we adopt Shih's (2004, p.29) concept of the Sinophone, which the scholar introduced to challenge the marginalization of Sinitic literatures created outside mainland China and to critique the ideological appropriation of these works by the Chinese establishment. Thus, rather than merely reflecting a linguistic phenomenon, the Sinophone should be understood as a form of resistance. It offers a valid and necessary counterpoint to the centripetal force of the People's Republic of China as the cultural epicenter of the Chinese-speaking/writing world and the dominance of Mandarin as the standard, model language.

academics specializing in Chinese-to-Italian translation studies but also for professional translators working with Chinese and Sinophone literatures.

## 2. BACKGROUND

By examining the interlinguistic translation of the proper names used by Dorothy Tse in her novel *Yingtoumao*, this research positions itself at the intersection of translation studies and onomastics. More specifically, it relates to literary onomastics, which can be described as the field that focuses on studying proper names within works of fiction (Ionescu, 1993, p.305).

The translation of proper names in literary texts, especially fictional ones, has been the subject of considerable research. For instance, Salmon (2006) explored how names in Russian literature are translated into Italian. Moruwanon (2010) investigated the translation of Yoruba proper names into English and French across three works by African authors. More recently, Abdel-Latif (2021) examined the translation of proper names in the Spanish edition of *Imārat Ya'qūbyān* (The Yacoubian Building) by Egyptian author Alaa Al Aswany. Additionally, many studies have focused on strategies to translate proper names in literary works specifically aimed at younger readers (Nord, 2003; Cámara Aguilera, 2009; Jaleniauskienė and Čičelytė, 2009, among others). This brief review of relevant studies underscores the considerable academic interest in this area and emphasizes its extensive geolinguistic significance and diversity.

Nevertheless, the amount of research on the translation of fictional names in Chinese and Sinophone literary works seems to be somewhat limited. Notable, however, is a recent study by Xu (2020). Through an analysis of the English translation of names for an impressive number of characters – 146 in total – from the works of Shen Congwen (沈從文),<sup>5</sup> the scholar concludes that Chinese proper names should not be translated but, instead, transcribed into Latin script. Additionally, the author suggests that an explanatory note should be included upon their first mention to convey the sense of foreignness that, for non-Sinophone readers, come with the Chinese (Xu, 2020, p.802). Earlier, Wang and Liu (2017) had examined the English translation of proper names in *Hong Lou Meng* (紅樓夢, Dream of the Red Chamber),<sup>6</sup> the main novel from imperial China. A similar analysis was conducted by Wo (2008), who focused on elements of the same novel, including proper names, that are not effectively conveyed in English. In contrast to studies focusing on the Chinese-English combination, one study examines translation into a language more closely related to Italian: in his article, Sun (2021) explores

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<sup>5</sup> Shen Congwen (1902-1988) was a prominent figure in modern Chinese literature. Born in the province of Hunan, he wrote works of fiction in which the rural setting and local traditions of his homeland play a crucial role. He was nominated twice for the Nobel Prize in Literature, with his second nomination securing him a place on the shortlist of potential laureates. Sadly, he passed away before the 1988 Nobel Prize was awarded.

<sup>6</sup> *Hong Lou Meng* is a novel of immense significance, comparable to the major works of nineteenth-century Western literature. Written by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, it was published posthumously in 1792, thirty years after the author's death. The novel is divided into 120 chapters, though it is believed that the last 40 chapters were likely written by different authors. It features a complex web of secondary characters and intertwined subplots that frequently diverge from the main narrative. While not directly focused on translation studies, there is substantial research on the symbolic and functional roles of proper names in *Hong Lou Meng*. Yang (1996), for instance, offers an in-depth analysis of the explicit and implicit meanings and functions of various toponyms and anthroponyms within the text.

the translation of Buddhist-related names in the classic novel *Xi You Ji* (西遊記, Journey to the West) from Chinese into Spanish.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that all these studies focus exclusively on the translation of personal names. However, in the case of *Yingtoumao*, toponyms and institutional names, too, present significant translation challenges, making their analysis particularly relevant. Consequently, this article aims to address this research gap by exploring these additional aspects of onomastic translation.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before delving into translation issues, it is essential to clarify what it is meant by “proper names.” In this study, I align with Parianou’s classification, which identifies six categories: personal names and other personified entities (also known as anthroponyms and, in a literary context, character names or charactonyms); toponyms; names of institutions, facilities, and other types of resources; names of specific objects and artworks; brands; and historical events (2007, pp.408-409). As stated in section 2, this study will focus on the first three categories.

Another useful categorization for the present research comes from García González and Coronado González (1991). Although they are specifically concerned with anthroponyms, I believe that their suggestion can be extended to other categories of proper names. They contend that personal names can either have or have not connotative value, even though, etymologically, they all carry a meaning. They refer to personal names without such connotative value as non-motivated anthroponyms (García González and Coronado González, 1991, p.51).

Theoretical discussions on the translation of proper names are extensive. As Viezzi notes, translating proper names presents a challenge which does not have predefined, universal solutions, therefore necessitating strategies that should be informed by linguistic, textual, intertextual, and pragmatic factors, among others (2004, pp.14-15). It is crucial that these strategies account for how the source text (ST) reader and the target text (TT) reader will interpret the information conveyed by each proper name. This consideration is vital, given that each textual input elicits a cognitive and emotional response from the reader, influenced by both inherent and extrinsic factors related to language and context (Salmon, 2007, p.93).

Translating proper names always involves a high degree of decision-making on the part of the translator, even when the decision is to leave them untranslated, which per se represents a translation strategy, too. In this regard, various scholars have proposed possible systematizations of such translational strategies. Although specifically addressing non-fiction texts, Särkkä (2007) provides a comprehensive overview, identifying strategies such as the unchanged importation of the ST name into the TT, adaptation to the target language’s grapho-phonological system, elucidation through explanatory notes that provide relevant cultural information not available to the TT reader, omission of the proper name, and – although rarely

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<sup>7</sup> This text represents one of the foremost works of fiction in the imperial Chinese literary tradition. Authored by Wu Cheng’en (吳承恩), a storyteller and poet who lived between 1505 and 1580, it draws inspiration from the 7th-century historical pilgrimage of Tripitaka, a monk who traveled to India in search of Buddhist sutras. Wu Cheng’en incorporated a wide array of stories, legends, fables, and tales that emerged around this mythical journey to the West in pursuit of sacred Buddhist texts.

– the substitution of the proper name with a reference that might be more comprehensible to the TT readers.

Conversely, Vermes (2003), in a study on the translation of fictional proper names from English to Hungarian, identifies four strategies: transfer, where the name is carried over unchanged into the TT; substitution, where the target language already has a conventional and widely accepted translation of the proper name, or when simply shifting from one grapho-phonological system to another; translation, which aims to evoke the same analytical implications for the TT reader as those for the ST reader; and modification, where the original name is replaced with another name that is not logically or conventionally related, or only partially so. Vermes' concept of modification also encompasses cases of omission, addition, and generalization. However, in my opinion, these decisions should be considered separately from modification as defined by Vermes, as well as from one another.

It is evident that many scholars have attempted at systematizing the translation techniques that those who render a text into another language have at their disposal. Nevertheless, in the relevant section, this study will analyze the decisions taken by the translator when translating the proper names in Dorothy Tse's novel into Italian, drawing on Franco Aixelá's strategies (1996 and 2000). I consider Franco Aixelá's framework to be one of the most detailed formulations of proper-name translation strategies, categorizing them into two main groups: those oriented towards preserving the original name and those aimed at substitution. The preservation strategies include repetition, adaptations (orthographic and terminological), linguistic translation, and glosses (both extra- and intratextual); whereas substitution strategies encompass universalization (limited or absolute), naturalization, ideological adaptation, omission, and autonomous creation (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p.111).

When translating into Italian and other languages that use the Latin script, the repetition strategy, which involves maintaining the original name's spelling, is clearly impractical if the ST is written in a language, like Chinese, that uses a different writing system. However, it might be applicable in cases where the proper name is directly presented in Latin script, such as when only initials are used or when foreign names are included in their original spelling. More commonly, when translating texts written in the Sinitic script into languages that use alphabetic scripts, the closest preservation technique would be orthographic adaptation, which involves transcribing Chinese characters into letters (of the Latin alphabet, in the specific case of Italian). This technique would involve using a phonetic transcription system, the most widely used being the *Hanyu pinyin* (also simply known as *pinyin*). In the case of *Yingtoumao*, this strategy must be preceded by a decision regarding the pronunciation of the characters, since the author is a Cantonese speaker. Therefore, the pronunciation of the sinograms should reflect Cantonese – rather than Mandarin – phonetics. Consequently, instead of using *pinyin*, the orthographic adaptation should adhere to the *jyutping* system.<sup>8</sup>

Terminological adaptation occurs when the target language already has an equivalent of the proper name, modified to fit the context of the target audience. For instance, the Sinophone

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<sup>8</sup> Rovira-Esteva explains that *pinyin* should not be regarded as a genuine phonetic transcription system. Instead, it employs Latin alphabet characters to provide an approximate representation of the pronunciation of Chinese characters (2015a, p.17). In contrast, *jyutping*, developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong in 1993, is a specialized system for the phonetic transcription of Cantonese.

toponym 台北 (*Taipei*) is adapted into English as “Taipei”. Semantic translation involves a literal rendering of the denotative meaning of the name; for example, it occurs when we translate 日本 (*Riben* in Chinese; *Nihon* in Japanese) as “Land of the Rising Sun”. Lastly, through glosses, the translator adds explanatory notes, clarifications, or expansions to provide additional context.

When translating from one language into another, various substitutive strategies can come into play. These include limited universalization, which consists in replacing the original name with an alternative that still carries some exotic charm due to its cultural background or the context set by the ST (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p.117); absolute universalization, which involves completely neutralizing the original name, making it a general reference without any specific cultural ties (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p.118); naturalization, that is the substitution of the original name with one that feels native to the target culture (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p. 119). Other strategies include ideological adaptation, which occurs when the translator alters the name to fit the cultural norms of the target culture, avoiding the original if it could be potentially seen as ideologically inappropriate by readers of the TT (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p.120). Lastly, omission means leaving out the name entirely, while autonomous creation adds a new name without direct linguistic connections to the name in the ST (Franco Aixelá, 1996, p. 123).

In this qualitative study, I will use Franco Aixelá’s strategies to analyze ten specific instances of translation of proper names. Although there are more names in the novel, I chose to focus on those that are most significant to the story, whether due to their frequent appearance or their importance. The names will be grouped into three categories: personal names or charactonyms, which include those of the main characters of the novel (a total of five); place names of key locations (three in total); institutional names related to the protagonist’s academic career (two).

#### 4. YINGTOUMAO BY DOROTHY TSE

Dorothy Tse is a Sinophone poet, fiction writer, and translator from Hong Kong. She also serves as Professor of Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. Tse started her literary career in the early 2000s, writing primarily in Chinese but occasionally in English, too. Her debut collection of short stories, 好黑 (*Hao Hei*, which could be translated as “Very Black” or “Very Dark”), was published in Taiwan in 2005. She later co-authored the collection 雙城辭典 (*Shuang Cheng Cidian*, 2013, or “A Dictionary of Two Cities”) with fellow Hongkonger Hon-lai Chu (韓麗珠). Highly active in Hong Kong’s intellectual circles, Tse is also a co-founder of *Fleurs des Lettres* (字花), one of the region’s most prominent literary journals, which has been in publication since 2006. Her writings often explore themes of alienation in relation to the complexities of modern society. Tse has been the recipient of several literary awards, which solidified her position as a leading voice in contemporary Sinophone literature. Her narrative work invites profound reflection and can be read as a commentary on the ever-changing world, particularly in the context of Hong Kong following the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People’s Republic of China, which took place in 1997.

Tse’s fiction has garnered critical acclaim for its thought-provoking narratives and innovative literary techniques. Her works provide readers with insights into the complex phenomena of modern urban life, which seems to be gradually engulfing humanity. Her most notable work to date is *Yingtoumao*, published in Taiwan in 2020. As of November 2024, the

novel has been translated into three languages: German (by Marc Hermann, 2022), English (by Natascha Bruce, 2023), and Italian (by Antonio Paoliello, 2024). Difficult to categorize, *Yingtoumao* has been described as an anti-fairy tale (Fan, 2023). Through the novel, Tse narrates the story of a fifty-year-old university professor who struggles both professionally and personally. His monotonous life changes dramatically after meeting a ballerina doll, who becomes his lover. The doll turns into the object of the professor's sentimental and erotic desires, leading him to fulfill his most secret sexual fantasies with her. However, the reality and ephemeral nature of the relationship with the ballerina shatters the world the professor has fabricated for himself. According to Lu (2020), the novel ventures into magical territory, yet its language, cultural elements, and geographical backdrop are deeply rooted in Hong Kong. The social environment which surrounds the professor's love affair also bears some resemblance to the recent protests witnessed by the city.

The close relationship between the fictional locations in the novel and the actual geography of Hong Kong is crucial, as it directly impacts translation strategies. Some readers have noted that while the place names in the novel are fabricated, they are strongly influenced by the real geographical context of Hong Kong (fide, 2021). Similarly, critics like Tam (2020), from Hong Kong, argue that *Yingtoumao* accurately reflects the current state of the city. Tse herself has noted in a recent interview that just as Hong Kong undergoes surprising and unexpected changes, which she experiences daily, the fictional city in her novel is not immune to such upheavals (Li, 2020). Indeed, despite its imaginary setting, the novel vividly portrays various aspects of Hong Kong, from its natural environment and iconic dishes to its relationship with Shenzhen, the twin city across the border, and the ever-present Southeast Asian domestic workers.

## **5. PROPER NAMES IN *YINGTOUMAO* AND THEIR TRANSLATION INTO ITALIAN**

Dorothy Tse's novel is a complex text with multiple layers of meaning and a unique web of names that, while depicting a dreamlike literary context, speaks clearly about the real world. The onomastics used by Tse adds depth to the narrative, creating a story with various levels of interpretation. In this regard, it serves as a compelling example of how

[a]s elemental acts of language, names offer us invaluable keys for interpreting literature. All we need do is assume that any particular work has a thematic unity of some sort, some expression about human experience, even if it seems to say that nothing has meaning. [...] Every name can evoke many associations and many shades of interpretation, and these interpretations may reach well beyond the intentions of the author. (Smith, 2016, p.309)

As previously mentioned, the novel features three types of proper names: charactonyms, toponyms, and institutional names, which contribute to the portrayal of the characters' identities, their symbolic representation, and the overall atmosphere. Regarding personal names, Tse assigns names not only to human characters but also to toys (humanized dolls) and to Jingtoumaau, another partially human character that, as we shall see, possesses traits that resist easy classification. The toponyms in the novel are entirely fictional, yet through environmental descriptions and plot development, readers can easily connect them to real-world locations. Finally, the text includes names of institutions, specifically two universities, one of which carries symbolic significance.

### 5.1. CHARACTONIMS<sup>9</sup>

In this section, I will focus on the five main characters of the novel, examining their names and how they have been translated into Italian. The translation to start with is the protagonist, 教授 Q (*jiaoshou Q* in *pinyin*), who has been rendered as “Professor Q” in Italian. This translation involves a semantic conversion of the academic title (with 教授 literally meaning “university professor”) followed by the retention of the initial of the name (Q). At this point, it is important to stress again that the protagonist of the novel is a middle-aged university lecturer who is dissatisfied with both his personal life and professional situation. For those familiar with modern Chinese literature, the initial Q might evoke Ah Q (阿Q), the central character from Lu Xun’s (魯迅) renowned short story “Ah Q zheng zhuan” (阿Q 正傳, 1921), known in English as “The True Story of Ah Q”.<sup>10</sup> Although Tse does not explicitly reference Ah Q, it is possible to interpret this charactonym as a intertextual nod to one of the most well-known characters in 20th-century Chinese literature. Indeed, the professor shares similarities with Ah Q, from being an ordinary man who considers himself superior to those around him to his lack of initiative and poor judgment, which lead him to make absurd choices that endanger his own existence. Through this name, Dorothy Tse ventures into the realm of literary allusion and intertextuality, which, despite being preserved in the TT through a strategy of retention, may be only recognized by readers familiar with Chinese literature.<sup>11</sup>

The second charactonym, Jingtoumao (鷹頭貓, or *Yingtoumao* in *pinyin*, as per Mandarin pronunciation), appears in the title of the novel, too. Its literal translation is “eagle-headed cat” a clever inversion of the sinograms that make up the Chinese word for “owl” (貓頭鷹 *maotouying*, literally “cat-headed eagle”). This name lends itself to various interpretations: the reference to a bird of prey is directly related to the character’s highly developed sense of vision. The inverted order of the sinograms reflect the character’s altered, non-normative value system. In the Italian translation, the linguistic play is maintained through a semantic translation involving the inversion of the two consonants in the word “gufo” (owl), resulting in the name “Fugo”. This semantic translation into Italian also contains multiple layers of interpretation. First, Jingtoumao is clearly a male character, and the Italian character name ends in “o” as many Italian masculine names do. Second, while the name is fictional, it is plausible and evokes a real Italian name: “Ugo”. Lastly, both readers of the ST and those of the TT can easily identify the inversion present in both the Chinese and Italian terms for “owl”.

<sup>9</sup> I chose to adopt the term “charactonym”, because it specifically refers to the proper names given to characters in fictional narratives. More accurately, the expression is used to describe names that convey specific traits of a character’s physical attributes or personality (Barros Ochoa, 1992, p.114).

<sup>10</sup> Lu Xun (1881-1949), recognized as a seminal figure in modern Chinese literature, is particularly noted for his incisive critique of traditional Chinese culture, which he blamed as the root cause of the nation’s socio-economic stagnation. Ah Q embodies this critical perspective and has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Critics have observed that, being “[a] symbol of China’s diseased national character and tradition, he suffers from a malady that leaves him hypersensitive to the outer world and empowers society and tradition to interfere with and mold his actions” (Huss, 2016, p.136).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, an online review notes: “Q教授不知道名字是不是從阿Q而來，但是他代表的正是迷惘年代的香港人，他們活過香港最精采的時代，卻過得渾渾噩噩” (As for Professor Q, I don’t know whether his name is derived from Ah Q, but he epitomizes the people of Hong Kong during a turbulent era. They lived through the city’s golden age, and yet did so in a state of profound confusion). (<https://nightseer470.pixnet.net/blog/post/218856870>, last accessed: November 12, 2024).

Although the translation has lost the references to the eagle and the cat, it introduces the concept of escape, encapsulated in the Italian term “fuga” (a noun literally meaning “escape” or “break out”), which is one of the features that characterizes Jingtaumaau, as he had been hiding for years before reappearing at the beginning of the novel, but towards the end of the novel, he runs away, disappearing again at a moment of heightened narrative tension.<sup>12</sup>

In the novel, a significant role is played by the professor’s wife: Maaleingaa (瑪利亞 or *Maliya* in *pinyin*, as per Mandarin pronunciation), which has been adapted terminologically in the Italian translation, as the target culture possesses an equivalent for this anthroponym: Maria. This charactonym alludes to a central figure in the Christian tradition, synonymous with purity, grace, kindness, and perfection – traits that also define the professor’s wife throughout the novel, who is explicitly compared to the Holy Mary (Tse, 2020, 75).

Next, we encounter another character which appears in the title: the music box ballerina, the doll with human characteristics whom the professor becomes infatuated with. Her name is Ngoiloisi (愛麗詩), which is the Cantonese rendition of Alice (the Mandarin pronunciation would be *Ailishi*). While a terminological adaptation such as “Alice” would be a reasonable choice for the Italian translation, the original text includes the following excerpt:

你說，你叫做愛麗詩。女孩子問你：「是貝多芬的愛麗詩，還是在鏡中世界的愛麗詩？」

(You say your name is *Ngoilaisi*. The girl asks you: “Are you the *Ngoilaisi* from Beethoven or the *Ngoilaisi* lost in the mirror?”) (Tse, 2020, 219).

The author clearly plays with two names that, although referring to different characters – Elise from Beethoven’s famous bagatelle and Alice, the protagonist of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* – are written with the same sinograms and, therefore, share the same pronunciation. In the Italian translation, to preserve both references and the logical coherence of the original text, a terminological adaptation has been employed. The characters 愛麗詩 are interpreted as the Chinese equivalent of “Eilis”, a Gaelic version of both names. Given that this is an oral exchange, the translator chose to use a name from a different language but one that aligns with the phonetics of Italian, as it is pronounced quite similarly to how an Italian speaker would pronounce both the English name “Alice” and the German name “Elise”.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the narrator introduces Dolaigan (多麗根, *Duoligen* if pronounced in Mandarin), the professor’s first doll. This charactonym has been translated as “Dollygirl”, which represents a semantic translation into English. The Italian version interprets the characters phonetically, reflecting a Cantonese adaptation of the English words “dolly” and “girl”. Indeed, this name

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<sup>12</sup> In the English version, the character is named “Owlsh,” which also serves as the title of the novel. While this translation does not employ the inversion of word components, it retains the reference to a bird of prey and emphasizes erudition, a key characteristic of the character, who is none other than the professor in his youth. According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, the term “owlsh” means “solemn and wise in appearance” (HarperCollins 2023).

<sup>13</sup> The English translator chose the name “Aliss.”

refers to a little doll (hence, “dolly”) with attributes typical of a young girl. Therefore, the Italian translation exhibits a blend of sound and meaning.<sup>14</sup>

## 5.2. TOPONYMS

In the fictional world of the novel, three locations play a significant role in the narrative. This section will analyze their names and how they have been rendered into Italian.

The story unfolds in a mountainous city, named Mogandei (摩根地, *Mogendi* in Mandarin), that bears a clear resemblance to Hong Kong. The first character can mean “annihilate”, while the second and third can be translated as “root” and “territory”/ “place”, respectively. Hence, this toponym metaphorically refers to a place where roots have been severed, symbolizing the identity crisis experienced by Hong Kong and its people.<sup>15</sup> In the Italian version, a substitution strategy was employed, and the city was named “Never”, as suggested by the Italian publisher. Hence, the original Sinophone name was omitted and replaced with a completely new toponym. In this sense, both the English version (which uses “Nevers”) and the Italian one display autonomous creations that can be interpreted as referring to another imaginary realm (Neverland, the fictional island described in J.M. Barrie’s fantasy novels) and are unrelated to the Hong Kong identity crisis.

Within the fictional world created by Dorothy Tse, we also encounter Waileingaa (維利亞). This toponym refers to downtown Never and, simultaneously, to the metropole, alluding to Hong Kong Island and the United Kingdom, respectively. Waileingaa is a Sinitic rendition of the name Victoria (維多利亞, or *Weiduoliya* if pronounced in Mandarin),<sup>16</sup> with the omission of the character 多 (*duo*), corresponding to the letters “cto” in English. In Italian, the term has been adapted to “Viria”, which is exactly Victoria minus the “cto”. In this case, we observe a creative play in the original that has been preserved in the Italian translation, merging cultural references and reshaping them to fit the narrative.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in *Yingtoumao*, Never shares a border with a country to the north, which established itself as a vanguardist republic and serves as a clear fictional representation of Communist China: Saatnaan (剎難, *Shanan* in *pinyin*, as per its Mandarin pronunciation). This case is more complex, as the author plays with Buddhist terminology by alluding to the idea of *ksana* (剎那 *shana*), meaning “a fraction of a second” in Sanskrit, and it vaguely reminds the English pronunciation of the real country, “China”. By replacing the first “a” in *ksana* with the “i” from “Cina” (Italian for “China”), the translator created the toponym “Ksina”. The strategy

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<sup>14</sup> In the English version, the doll is named “Dollygal”.

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, I align with the perspective of journalist Wong Tsz Yuen, who contends that “Hong Kong used to be an economic city where people did not discuss politics much, but now it is becoming increasingly politicized, and Hongkongers’ identity is becoming an increasingly sensitive issue. As a result, an ‘identity crisis’ is occurring” (Jin, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Even today, many places in Hong Kong are named after Queen Victoria. Examples include “Victoria Harbour”, “Victoria Park”, and “Queen Victoria Street”, to name just a few.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, in the English version, it is rendered as “Valeria”. This preserves only part of the original reference: while it retains a female name, echoing the original’s use of a toponym based on a woman’s name, it loses the connection to Queen Victoria and the historical context of Hong Kong alluded to in the ST.

aims to keep the original subtle meanings and connections, while translating them in a way that makes sense and resonates with the audience of the TT.<sup>18</sup>

### 5.3. NAMES OF INSTITUTIONS

In the novel, two universities are mentioned: the first is the university in the metropole where the professor studied, while the second is the one located in Never where he currently works.

The first institution is called Waileingaa Daaihok (維利亞大學, *Weiliya daxue* in Mandarin). If literally translated as “University of Viria”, this name could be ambiguous, as it raises questions about which Viria it refers to. Is it the island of Viria where the action takes place, or the metropole? To avoid this ambiguity, a new name was created, unrelated to the linguistic cues of the original text. Thus, the institution has become “Università dell’Impero” (University of the Empire) in Italian, as it is situated in the imperial capital. This clarification in the Italian version removes the ambiguity present in the original text and which readers of the ST had to solve through context.

The university where the professor works is named Gu Zau Daaihok (孤舟大學, *Gu Zhou daxue* in Mandarin), which literally translates to “University of the Lone Boat”. However, this name does not fit the Italian academic naming conventions, where universities typically have names based on their locations, which can be cities, administrative or historical regions.<sup>19</sup> After consulting with the author, a new interpretative key was provided: the name was chosen to evoke the solitude of the academic world and the desire for Hong Kong to be like a boat drifting away from its current situation (Tse, 2022). Consequently, the name was retained through a phonetic adaptation into the Latin alphabet, with a gloss in the text for its first occurrence: “Università Gu Zau, della giunca solitaria” (“University Gu Zau, of the Lonely Junk”).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of the Italian translation of ten proper names in the novel *Yingtoumao*, several translation strategies were identified. Based on Franco Aixelá’s (1996) classification, which divides strategies into those aiming to preserve the original name and those involving substitution, it is evident that, in most of the cases analyzed, the translator employed preservation strategies.

Repetition was observed only with the name “Professor Q”, where the initial of his name, in Latin letters in the ST, was transferred unchanged to the Italian version. Terminological adaptation, either alone or combined with other strategies, was the most frequently used approach. This preference likely stems from the fact that many proper names in the ST are Sinicized versions of Western names, which already have established Italian equivalents. Spelling adaptation occurred in one case (“Università Gu Zau”) but was accompanied by an intratextual gloss. Semantic translation was used in two instances (“Fugo” and “Dollygirl”), particularly when wordplay or characteristics were evident to the ST reader, making it crucial

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<sup>18</sup> In the English version, the country becomes “Ksana.”

<sup>19</sup> Occasionally, a university’s name might reflect its area of specialization, such as “Università di Lingue e Comunicazione” (University of Languages and Communication). If the institution is Catholic, its name might include a religious reference, like “Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore” (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart).

to achieve a similar effect for Italian readers. In the examples, substitution strategies were used twice. In both cases, autonomous creation was chosen, though for different reasons: the first (“Never”) was suggested by the TT’s publisher, and the second (“Università dell’Impero”) to clarify ambiguities in the ST.

In conclusion, the present analysis reveals the application of various interlinguistic translation strategies for proper names. However, although this study represents a stepping stone to a more systematized approach to both research and practice in the field of literary onomastics translation from Chinese, I am aware that *Yingtoumao* – with its many names reflecting linguistic and cultural contexts beyond the Sinophone world and closer to Euro-American settings – limits the applicability of the findings to other Chinese and Sinophone literary works that may lack such Western references. Given the constraints of this study, it should be viewed as a preliminary investigation. Therefore, a more comprehensive study involving a broader range of literary texts and translators would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Nevertheless, this research underscores the critical importance of a meticulous and reasoned approach to translating proper names. As this case study demonstrates, translating these elements requires vigilant decision-making, akin to that used for other units of meaning. Finally, it is worth noting that, as renowned Sinophone author Eileen Chang (1944) observed, naming someone is a small act of creation, and so is translating that name.<sup>20</sup>

### Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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<sup>20</sup> Eileen Chang (張愛玲, Zhang Ailing, 1920-1995) is regarded as one of the most important Sinophone writers of the twentieth century. She is remembered for her exquisite literary style and modern perspectives on women and society. Regarding the importance of names, the original text states: “為人取名字是一種輕便的，小規模的創造” (Giving someone a name is a small, practical act of creation).

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study examines the complexities of translating proper names – whether toponyms, anthroponyms, or institutional names – in Chinese-language literature, with a particular focus on Dorothy Tse’s *Yingtoumao yu Yinyuexiang Nühai* (2020) and its Italian translation, *Il professore e la ballerina del carillon* (2024). Proper names in Chinese pose unique challenges as they are composed of sinograms that inherently carry meaning. Therefore, translators must consider not only the explicit and implicit connotations of these names, but also their reception and interpretation by the target audience. Dorothy Tse, a Hong Kong Sinophone writer, explores themes of alienation in modern society. Her novel *Yingtoumao*, which can be considered a fairytale gone awry, follows a professor’s obsession with a ballerina doll. Set in an imagined place resembling Hong Kong, the story reflects the city’s social and political shifts after the 1997 sovereignty transfer. Hence, the challenge of translating proper names is amplified in Tse’s novel, where onomastics is intricately tied to a reimagined yet recognizable version of the city.

Grounded in translation studies and literary onomastics, the article highlights the limited research on translating fictional proper names in Chinese and Sinophone literatures. While existing scholarship focuses primarily on anthroponyms, *Yingtoumao* also introduces significant toponyms and institutional names, representing an under-explored area in onomastic translation. Methodologically, the study analyzes specific examples of translated proper names, exposing the decisions taken by the translator to balance fidelity to the source text with clarity and accessibility in Italian. Strategies for preservation and substitution are evaluated, and this case study proposes possible solutions not only for translators from Chinese into Italian but also for those working with other Romance languages.

Focusing on ten significant names in the novel, this study uses Franco Aixelá’s detailed framework for analyzing proper-name translation strategies, categorized into strategies of preservation and substitution. Preservation includes techniques such as orthographic adaptation, where names written in sinograms are transcribed into the Latin script, requiring decisions on Cantonese pronunciation using *jyutping* instead of Mandarin-based *pinyin*. Terminological adaptation applies when equivalents exist in the target language, while semantic translation conveys the denotative meaning of names. Additional explanatory glosses can further aid the target audience’s understanding. Substitution strategies include universalization, where names are neutralized or given culturally familiar alternatives, naturalization to domesticate names, ideological adaptation for cultural or political appropriateness, omission, and autonomous creation, where new names without linguistic ties to the original are introduced.

*Yingtoumao* showcases a unique system of proper names, which are crucial in shaping the narrative and providing depth to the story. The novel features three categories of proper names: charactonyms, toponyms, and names of institutions. They all offer symbolic and thematic significance, often conveying cultural or literary references that resonate with the real world. The charactonyms in the novel reflect the internal struggles and traits of the characters. The protagonist’s name may suggest connections to Chinese literary traditions, while other characters’ names evoke specific traits or roles. Although fictional, the toponyms are designed to reflect real-world places, with subtle references to cultural and geographical contexts. In

translation, the names may undergo semantic transformation or substitution, maintaining thematic resonance while adapting them to fit the target language's cultural and linguistic framework. Lastly, the novel also features names of institutions, particularly universities, which play symbolic roles in the narrative.

Through the analysis of the Italian translation of some of the proper names in *Yingtoumao*, this article shows that preservation strategies were generally favored. Terminological adaptation, including both standalone and combined strategies, was common, especially for Sinicized names of Western origin. Spelling adaptations were rare, but one instance involved an intratextual gloss. Semantic translation was used for names carrying wordplay or distinct characteristics (e.g., “Fugo” and “Dollygirl”), to evoke a similar effect for Italian readers. Substitution strategies by means of autonomous creation appeared in two cases: in one instance it was suggested by the publisher, while in the other it was used to clarify ambiguity present in the source text. However, although this study provides valuable insights into literary onomastics translation, its conclusions are based on a limited corpus. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies involving a broader selection of texts would yield more comprehensive findings.